DOMINANCE OF THE TRAPPINGS OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION IN ‘AFRICA MAGIC’ MOVIES: A CHALLENGE FOR EDUCATING THE CHRISTIAN YOUTH

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Abstract

This article draws attention to the frequent presence of rituals, symbols and other trappings of the African Traditional Religion in ‘Africa Magic’ movies, particularly those emanating from the Western and the Southern regions of Africa. The paper sets out to establish the reasons for the abidance of African values and other cultural heritages in the life of those who have embraced Christianity. It argues that instances of such recurring presence of the Traditional Religion are indicative of the continued endurance of conviction by the people in the promises and resources of African Traditional Religion. The paper identifies some of the strengths and resources of the African Traditional Religion that enable it to retain its attraction among African Christians. The common ground between African Traditional Religion and Christianity are also highlighted. The presentation ends with suggestions as to how African Christian youth should watch ‘Africa Magic’ movies with a critical frame of mind for distinguishing between the good and the bad aspects of these movies in relation to their lives as young disciples of Christ in modern Africa.

Introduction

Although the ‘death’ of African Traditional Religion has often been celebrated, directly or indirectly, in many historical accounts of the successful activities of the missionaries in planting Christianity in Africa (Isichei, 1973, Obi, 1980; Nwosu, 1982; Eke, 1983), the enduring presence of African Traditional Religion in the minds of the people has continued to draw attention. Commenting in this regard, for example, Ritchie (1998:1) underscored the point that although:
Many of the African Instituted Churches will tell you that they have departed from paganism and are now delivered into the Kingdom of God; therefore they have nothing to do with African Traditional Religion. But if we wish to understand the interplay of religious ideas and the matrices within which the people live their lives, we would do well to go beyond the superficial; to ‘smell out’ what lies beneath the surface of religious discourse, and investigate the root metaphors, symbols and core values of the lives of African people. There are indications, both from field research and from the published literature that the religious consciousness of African peoples still remains in many ways functional, even where the superstructure of African Traditional Religion has disappeared. By superstructure, I mean the apparatus of worship: the traditional priesthoods (where such existed), the places of worship, and the religious ceremonies associated with African Traditional Religion.

Supporting the above, and offering a similar comment, Kalu (1994: 36) observed that “the gospel has not been preached with power, simplicity and direct confrontations with the powers in the African’s world. The Holy Spirit has been grieved and hindered. Thus the powers at the gates of individual, family, communal and national lives have been left to operate untrammeled.”

Of course, the latest signs of this endurance of conviction by the people in the elements and rituals of African Traditional Religion are the frequent manifestation of the different aspects of the African Traditional Religion in the now popular ‘Africa Magic’ movies, particularly those authored and popularized by Nigerian actors, and those from Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa. Some contents and themes encompassed in those movies clearly betray the tendency of most African Christians, to resort to, or to seek redress or protection from the resources of African Traditional Religion in times of stress or when confronted with the multiple problems and dilemmas of living in today’s African world. For instance, many of the popular movies, particularly those from Nigeria, West Africa, often referred to as the Nollywood, highlight: (1) the presence of African Christians’ frequent recourse to the practice of polygamy as a solution to the problem of childlessness among African wedded
couples; (2) frequent consultation of witchdoctors for talisman in gaining victory over political adversaries; (3) use of charms through consultation of traditional medicine men by Christian civil servants for gaining promotion in their workplaces and for intimidating opponents in disputes over land; (4) instances of active belief among West African Christians in the reality of curses and ancestor displeasure as the basis for people’s misfortunes and lack of progress in life; and (5) continued belief by West African Christians in the influence of the mammy-water and other water-spirits (Horton, 1995) in influencing people’s destinies in present day Africa.

These themes reflect various aspects of the African worldview that provide the philosophical and sociological foundations of African Traditional Religion. For instance, commenting on the eminent value accorded to the idea of having children in Igbo (Nigerian) culture, Mere (1973: 93) points out the following:

Traditionally children are highly valued. They have to continue the ancestral line in order to retain the family’s ownership of whatever property belongs to it. The reality of family extinction cannot be ducked where children are not forthcoming. Such a situation is socially abominable. On the part of any Igbo parents, having children wards off the anxiety of growing old and fear of loss of property to undeserving fellows.

Similarly, the philosophical roots of the rituals such as consulting at shrines which is a frequent occurrence in ‘Africa Magic’ movies derive their sense and perspective from the theory of causality enshrined in African worldview. Commenting in this regard, Gifford (2004:84) observes that in African traditional perspective:

Causality is to be discerned primarily in the spiritual realm, although natural causality is not entirely disregarded. Destiny or fate (nkraabea) is important, as are all kinds of spiritual influences. ‘A man’s trading ventures may succeed as the right forces aid him, or be unsuccessful because someone is “spoiling” his work by using charms against him. It is impossible to turn in any direction and say of any matter
that the gods and spirit-ancestors, or witches and bad *suman* (magical objects), have no part in it.’ This world is one of action and counteraction of potent forces; spirit acting upon spirit. A stronger or higher being can easily destroy or impair the weaker or lower; since humans are low beings, they can be controlled by the former.

Continuing, Gifford (2004: 84) further observes that “for the common man, religion is very largely the means of reinforcing life. ...Consulting at shrines serves normally to discover why individual persons or communities are suffering particular afflictions; the causes usually are divined in specific terms, and almost always are connected to the supernatural.”

The above indications suggest that it is the African worldview that supplies the infrastructure that feeds the content and message propagated in ‘Africa Magic’ movies, particularly those crafted by Nigerian artists and actors.

The purpose of this article is not to extol African Traditional Religion *per se*. The objective, rather, is to establish the basis for the unrelenting hold by African Traditional Religion on the minds of the people reflected by the continuing presence of aspects of that religion’s values and rituals in ‘Africa Magic’ movies. This means that, essentially, the aim of this article is to identify the basis for the endurance of conviction, by many African Christians, in the power of African Traditional Religion to help them to come to terms with the challenges they face in the contemporary and complicated African world.

Conducting such a discussion is necessary. It will help to throw light on what makes African Traditional Religion thrive and draw allegiance from a sizeable number of African Christians despite the influential presence of missionary activities and Christian practices in sub-Saharan Africa for the past hundred years. But, over and above such exploration, effort will be made to show that Christianity is not a foreign religion in Africa, particularly when its principal values are placed side-by-side with the positive values espoused in African Traditional Religion. This will be followed by a brief mention of what the Christian youth should know and do as young Christians practicing their Christian faith in the context of their African religious heritage.
And so, we begin with highlighting the factors influencing the endurance of conviction in African Traditional Religion, by a good number of Christians in modern Africa. But, first of all, it needs to be acknowledged that it was Ezeanya (1972), the late Archbishop of Onitsha Archdiocese of Nigeria in West Africa, who first recognized this notion of the ‘endurance of conviction’ in African Traditional Religion by many African Christian converts. The present article adopts such a metaphor to give recognition to, and explain the basis for the dominant presence of the trappings of African Traditional Religion in ‘Africa Magic’ movies. And, for the purposes of this article, it needs to be mentioned that the two terms, ‘African Traditional Religion’ and ‘African Indigenous Religion,’ are not only the same but also are used interchangeably.

Factors responsible for the endurance of conviction in African Indigenous Religion

Given below are some of the factors which the present writer has offered to explain the basis for the endurance of conviction in African Indigenous Religion as reflected in the ‘Africa Magic’ movies featured in national television stations in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa. It also forms a regular programme (Channel 114) in the Digital Satellite Television (DStv) based in South Africa.

1. African belief in the theory of double/mystical causality

The African worldview that influences the behavior of many contemporary Africans emphasizes that human misfortunes can arise either from visible or invisible forces. The same worldview also teaches that human beings are fragile beings, at the mercy of many powers beyond their control (Kalu, 1978). Some of these dangerous powers are understood to come from evil men and women, as well as from evil spirits and displeased ancestors (Gifford, 2004). Thus, when things happen to a member of the community, such as the wound of a snake bite that refuses to heal, a modern solution to the problem is not preferred. In that circumstance, the consultation of a native medicine-man or woman, or a diviner becomes a necessity. This is what has made the role of the African Traditional Religion still relevant in contemporary times. The belief in the fragility of human beings in a
precarious universe (Kalu, 1978), compels a good number of practicing Christian drivers to resort to the wearing of a talisman on their ankles or hands while driving. This, they do, as a way of protecting themselves from death, if and when an accident occurs.

2. Failure of Western medicine to respond to all the health needs of the people

Despite its major victory over most infectious diseases in our age, modern (Western) medicine, propagated in Christian hospitals, is yet to find lasting solutions to a number of health problems that disturb the African mind. For example, Western medicine is yet to find answers to a variety of orthopedic problems involving the need for successful bone-setting without the need for amputation. In that context, those affected prefer consulting traditional healers (Ezeanya, 1972) who rely on the guidance of divination and the traditional process to discern a way of picking the shattered bones together to get the patient on his or her feet again. Consequently, according to Quarcooopome (1987:197) both “Christian and Muslim patients resort to herbal and mystical medicine from traditional healers in addition to or use as alternative to medical prescriptions.”

In this way, African Traditional Religion is given opportunity to thrive. In addition, unlike Western medicine, propagated in Christian and government hospitals that focuses on physical and psychological medicine, African traditional medicine, drawing from many elements of African Traditional Religion, uses or resorts to medicine for other purposes, such as:

A. the prevention and cure of diseases,
B. the enhancement of fertility,
C. success in activities such as sports, marketing, love-making and defeating opponents in political elections,
D. securing of mystical protection from theft and in driving,
E. gaining the upper hand in difficult court cases,
F. ensuring success in securing a job, gaining a promotion as well as protection against envious work colleagues, and
G. success in exacting vengeance when unjustly treated through the use of vengeance medicines (Metuh, 1981).

The above elements suggest that certain communities in different parts of Africa south of the Sahara are noted for their expertise in helping users secure access to these ‘survival’ medicines. It is such practices that Ogot (1966:180), in her novel, The Promised Land, was alluding to when she exclaimed through the voice of one of the characters, Nurse Elizabeth, who stated: “We’re all Christians, Dr. Thomson, but as Africans we know that there are bad spirits that cause disease, or a bad eye that causes death. European medicine has no power over these bad spirits. ... African medicine cures them.”

These indications suggest that in the African context, not all medicines are targeted at curing physical diseases. Many traditional medicines involve the practice of ‘enhancement’ cures. Hence, a good number of the African movies, particularly those from West Africa, contain instances of many characters resorting to use of ‘enhancement’ medicines to deal with life and its dilemmas, obstacles, trials and misfortunes.

3. Inadequacy of science and technology in controlling weather problems

Again, the inability of Western science and technology to control weather problems in modern Africa is a disappointment to many African farmers. This has compelled people in some African villages to resort to their traditional means of controlling the weather through ritual process intertwined with the practice of African Traditional Religion. This problem is particularly felt in times of droughts. In such a circumstance, many ordinary Africans, particularly those located in arid regions of Africa, take recourse in the guidance of divination by rain makers, the African specialists (Abbink, 1993). The rituals involved in this process usually are rooted in African Traditional Religion. Consequently, as long as Western science and technology are unable to find a permanent answer to the problem of weather in the African context, the need for resorting to the traditional way of asking for rain will continue to be used in drought-stressed African regions. In that case, scenes such as the one
presented in the Citizen Television of Kenya in August 2009 of the Massai maidens of Kenya trooping down to the dry river-bed, dressed in their full cultural regalia and praying to God to end the drought amidst ritual songs and dance will continue.

4. The adaptive potential of the African Traditional Religion

Another important factor that encourages the attraction of African Traditional Religion among a good number of African Christians is that it is not a rigid form of religion. This is in contrast to the intolerant attitude of missionary Christianity and some of its fanatic members. The purist or the ‘either-or’ position of Western Christianity makes some of its African converts frustrated and caricatured as not fully-practicing Christians when they try to draw resources from both religions. This annoys many people, such as Christian polygamists, many of whom were forced into polygamy by circumstances beyond their control (Metuh, 1981; Nwoye, 2005). Such Christians easily disconnect or defect from Christianity to fall back to the traditional religion, where their plight appeared to be better understood and appreciated. This situation has caused many to lose interest in Western Christianity and to turn to African Traditional Religion once more, which promotes the continued visible and invisible loyalty to African Indigenous Religion.

5. Belief in African Traditional Religion as a religion of protection

Most educated Africans still believe in the influence of witchcraft and magic since many see their progress in life as influenced by the goodwill of gods, benevolent spirits, and their powerful ancestors (Gifford, 2004). Therefore, people tend to retain these traditional influences. They pay homage to them in celebrating their progress (e.g., when they succeed in acquiring a shamba or setting up a homestead). Even some professional drivers, soldiers, and politicians in modern Africa try to get ‘protected’ in the traditional way. They engage in this process as a security measure for accidents or being hurt in contact with enemies.
Supporting the above, Ejizu (1987: 132) points out that the prayer economy of the Igbo shows that:

Man’s life and the general welfare of his world are the central focus of attention; the primary thrust of most religious activities is geared towards the enhancement of man’s life and the promotion of his total well-being. This emphasis portrays the belief in Igbo Religion that man’s life, although received from God, is the greatest to be fostered.

Consequently, it is becoming a frequently observed fact that even some of the most modernized African Christians, scholars, scientists and traders today still consult African divinities, diviners, and healers, when their health or other affairs are in serious trouble. Many among them have been known to sneak away from their church pews, discard their three-piece suits, or steal away by night to healers in forest shrines, and carry out all manner of ritual sacrifices when these are demanded (Mbiti, 1969; Metuh, 1981).

It has been equally noted in some of the popular press that some African politicians, most of them professed Christians, do resort to the support, protection, and influence of magic and witchcraft to improve their chances of success in their bids for political office. These ideas are demonstrated in ‘Africa Magic’ movies but never as something to be emulated. Yet such practices, where they persist, promote the continued relevance and prosperity of the African Indigenous Religion, assuring the future of African Traditional Religion.

Such Janus-faced technique of resorting to the traditional/spiritual process where the modern approach has failed has been commented upon by Stinton (2004). Stinton (2004) notes that for some African Christians, moving from church to church, as well as to Odunsini (the traditional healer of body and soul), is not a sign of lack of faith if relief from evil influences of the spiritual powers of oppression fails to occur in their Christian context.

What is argued in this article is that the above factors have created a gap that makes African Traditional Religion continue to be relevant in the life of African Christians despite the presence and influence of Christianity, Western medicine, and Western science and
technology. And it is that continued relevance of the indigenous religion which explains the dominant presence of aspects of African Traditional Religion in ‘Africa Magic’ movies.

**Positive human values in African Traditional Religion**

The points made in the preceding paragraphs suggest that African Traditional Religion is not all about magic or witchcraft. According to Mbiti (1975), over and above the trappings of magic and witchcraft found in most indigenous religions throughout the world, are profound values. Drawing attention to such values embedded in African Traditional Religion is crucial, since doing so will assist young African Christians develop a new perspective for reviewing Traditional Religion and recognizing aspects of that religion that are not antagonistic to the principal teachings of Christianity. In this regard, as identified by Mbiti (1975), Metuh (1981), Ejizu (1987), Quarcoo (1987), Tutu (1988), Ekwunife (1990), and Nwoye (2005) among such positive values enshrined in African Traditional Religion are the following:

- respect for the sacredness of human life,
- respect for morality and upright living,
- respect for truth-telling as a noble principle of life,
- emphasis on achievement motivation and the spirit of industry,
- emphasis on marriage, extended family system and procreation of children,
- emphasis on communal living grounded on the spirit of “ubuntu,”
- respect for age and seniority,
- emphasis on this-worldly successes and
- emphasis on the sacred, and symbolism in religious worship.

It may be helpful to elaborate on each of these values in more detail in order to demonstrate the positive elements of Traditional Religion.

**(1) Respect for the sacredness of human life**
Because of the great respect which Africans give to human life as sanctioned by the traditional religion, many go to great lengths to preserve and protect life. In many respects, the traditional African attitude to divinities and ancestors is centred on how to manipulate them to promote the welfare and enhancement of the lives of humans in this world (Mbiti, 1969; Ekwenife, 1990; Horton, 1995; Gifford, 2004; Nwoye, 2005). It is this same point that Ejizu (1987) is emphasizing when he articulates that, as far as Igbo and indeed African religion is concerned, it is human life and the general welfare of humans in the world that are of cardinal importance. In that way, he explains that the fundamental intent of most religious activities in Igboland is toward the enhancement of human life and the promotion of people’s total well-being in the world. This means that there is a clear recognition in African Traditional Religion of the need for the support of supernatural forces in helping to preserve and promote life. In particular this is demonstrated by members of the community seeking material satisfaction, a prosperous life, well-bred offspring, wealth and health. Hence, the traditional African religious prayers and sacrifices to the deities mainly focus on praise and petition for the welfare of humans in this world (Ekwenife, 1990; Horton, 1995; Nwoye, 2005).

Thus, even when sacrifices are made to malevolent spirits, the only reason for doing so is to keep them from causing harm to humans, helping adherents cope with the uncertainties of life, and for protection and progress in life (Gifford, 2004). In this way, African religious heritage discourages the taking of human life either through abortion, suicide, or through murder or spilling of another’s blood. Because life is taken to be sacred (and therefore deeply respected), it cannot be taken away with impunity. Among many ethnic groups in Africa, such as among the Igbo of Nigeria, suicide is considered the most abominable crime against human society. For this reason people guilty of suicide are punished through denying them the benefit of formal burial rites (Achebe, 1958; Nwoye, 2005).

(2) Respect for morality and upright living

African religious heritage contains some checks and balances that are intended to promote healthy interpersonal living among members of the living and the dead. In this way,
irresponsible living is discouraged, and committing other crimes (Amadi, 1982) are perceived as going against the prescriptions of the Supreme Being, the ancestors, the local divinities, and other invisible forces. Further, the ultimate wish of a traditional African person as Mbiti (1969, 1975); Arinze, (1970); Ekwunife (1990); and Nwoye (2005) is to: (1) live a good and worthy life here on earth; (2) die at a ripe old age; (3) receive full and proper burial rites; and (4) be admitted into the college of the ancestors. This means that African religious heritage places great emphasis on a disciplined way of life aimed at keeping intact the harmony, well-being, and effective co-existence of members of the community; including the living, the dead, the ancestors, and children yet unborn.

(3) Respect for truth-telling as a noble principle of life

One of the major canons in African Traditional Religion is that truth-telling or the making of just or honest utterances enhances human life since it promotes the triumph of justice over injustice (Ilogu, 1974; Ifesieh, 1989; Ekwunife, 1990). In this way, the traditional African sees the life of falsehood as the way of disorder and disharmony among human beings. Hence, among the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria, a liar is basically a chaos generator while truth-telling is seen as synonymous with the promotion of order and predictability in the community. In this way, a respected elder can never be associated with telling a lie (Ejizu, 1987). Based on the above, African communities have a strong moral orientation in their conception of truth-telling.

(4) Emphasis on achievement-motivation and the spirit of industry

In his novel, Things Fall Apart, Achebe (1958) observes that for the Igbo, and by extension for other members of the indigenous groups in Africa, an individual’s success is judged by the strength of his or her arm. This means that in African religious heritage, the spirit of indolence is discouraged, while the spirit of industry and hard work is extolled.

In this way, people are honored with high-ranking titles and accolades in traditional Africa, not according to inherited assets from parents or families but from the beneficiary’s personal and solid achievements in life. Hence, an important element of an African concept
of a true human being is that of a determined person who struggles with the environment, as a means of self sustenance and social distinction (Amadi, 1965).

The above observations mean that many Africans fear or are ashamed of being a failure. This is seen as a calamity to be avoided as much as possible through the spirit of industry and hard-work. This means that in African religious heritage, much emphasis is placed on wealth creation rather than on consumerism. It is therefore somewhat un-African to see people these days who do nothing but crave to enjoy life and build estates on the sweat of others. Similarly, it is only recently that we begin to find people who do nothing and yet become leaders. In traditional African society, one could not lead without being first and foremost an accomplished person, having achieved something of note both for him/herself and for the community (Achebe, 1958).

5. Emphasis on marriage, extended family system and procreation of children

One of the unique characteristics of African religious heritage is the respect it accords to marriage and family life (Mbiti, 1969; 1992). Accompanying this emphasis is the related attention that is given to the importance of procreation, considered in many ethnic groups in Africa as the main purpose of marriage. For this reason, childlessness is very much regretted since it is considered a threat to the life and stability of the African family (Anozie, 1998). A related idea is the important recognition given to the value of kin relations and to the taboo against incest in the African traditional religious ethics.

6. Emphasis on communal living or the spirit of ‘ubuntu’

This is another unique characteristic of African religious heritage which distinguishes it from the ideology of life as emphasized in the West. In Western culture, the life of autonomous independence and the spirit of individualism are emphasized whereas in traditional African thought, the spirit of ‘ubuntu’ is extolled (Mkhize, 2004). What this means is that in Africa the emphasis is given to a life lived in community rather than in isolation from one’s kith and kin. The spirit of ‘ubuntu’ refers to the idea that we are who we are through the support and influence of others. Hence the famous observation made by Mbiti (1969:109)
that in Africa the understanding is that “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.” This communal attitude promotes the spirit of give and take and sharing instead of selfishness and isolation in the context of African religion and social ethics.

(7) Respect for age and seniority

In the traditional religious social ethic (in most parts of Africa), an emphasis is placed on age and seniority, and because of that elders are respected (Achebe, 1958; Mbiti, 1969; Metuh, 1981). Junior siblings are taught to respect their senior siblings, uncles, aunties and neighbors. However, seniors are not to exert authority on the juniors needlessly, but also to protect and support them. In many parts of Africa (but particularly in countries like Kenya, Tanzania, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Ghana), those who are born within a particular age range and who are initiated together, form groups that become attached to the welfare and success of one another. In seeing themselves as members of one destiny, these age groupings are given particular names by which they can be identified and differentiated from those above or below them. Thus bonded, members of each group consider themselves to be one. They share what belongs to them and, in particular, support one another in times of need, as if they were real brothers or sisters.

8) Emphasis on this worldly success

Unlike the Christian religion that preaches the gospel of eternal happiness in God’s paradise that can take precedence over what happens to people in this world, the goal of members of African traditional religion is pragmatic and this-worldly centered (Horton, 1995; Nwoye, 2005). This means that in the context of African religion and ethics, emphasis is given to a prosperous life here on earth as a foundation for a happy state in afterlife. Based on this understanding, authorities agree that for the followers of African Traditional Religion, a life of prosperity and positive involvement with the physical world of the living (even when one is dead) is the ideal, and cessation of such involvement is seen as the ultimate horror (Mbiti, 1969; Metuh, 1981). Consequently, one may perceive that life in this world is the best there
is. And if anything is to come after it, it should, in one way or another, involve more of the same (Bitek, 1970; Ejizu, 1987; Ekwunife, 1990; Horton, 1995; Nwoye, 2005).

**Areas of similarity between Christianity and African Traditional Religion**

The above ideas are intended to demonstrate that African Traditional Religion has a number of things in common with Christianity. Commenting in this regard, Kalu (2003: 31) points out that in the encounter between the two religions, “...both Christianity and Igbo primal religion found points of contact or continuity, namely they share identical worldview consisting of:

- belief in the existence of the spiritual/supernatural order, over and above the physical world of matter,
- belief in the existence of the Supreme Being, *Ngai, Nkulunkulu, Chiokike*, the Creator of the universe,
- belief in the interaction between the visible and invisible worlds,
- belief in life after death,
- respect for the sacredness of human life,
- respect for morality and upright living,
- respect for truth-telling as a noble principle of life, and
- respect for age and seniority, including one’s parents.

This angle in our discussion is important as it shows that African Traditional Religion is not an isolated religion, primitive and superstitious in its beliefs and understandings, as some would hold (Ejizu, 2001). Rather, from the preceding discussions it can be seen that most of the essential elements of African Traditional Religion and ethics also are emphasized in Christian religion and ethical practice. It is this same point that Arinze and Fitzgerald (1990:49) seem to be alluding to when they suggested that “a study of the Traditional Religion as to its name, its major objects of beliefs, especially God the Creator, the
fundamental rites in this religion, sacrifice, priesthood, prayer, marriage, the human soul, life after death, religion and moral life” are crucial for a proper assimilation of Christian principles.

Sources of African religious heritage

To demonstrate further that African Traditional Religion is an encompassing religion which goes beyond the trappings of magical rituals and practices, some effort will be made under this heading to highlight some of the extensive sources of African Traditional religious heritage. This is crucial since one notion that has been ably addressed by previous commentators on African Traditional Religion (Idowu, 1973; Bitek, 1970; Mbiti, 1969) is that it is not a religion of the book, with no sacred writings to preserve its basic teachings, doctrines and practices. These previous investigators agree that in spite of this limitation, African Traditional religious awareness permeates the traditional African person’s environment; an environment in which people unconsciously carry part of the traditional religious consciousness in the names given to them at birth (Anozie, 1968).

This means that there are so many places within the African environment of people and things where the deposits of African religious heritage can be found. Mbiti (1975), for example, points out that African Traditional Religion in particular and African religious heritage in general, are manifested in the following:

• rituals, ceremonies, and festivals of the indigenous African people, their shrines, sacred places, and religious objects (including groves, rocks, caves, hills, mountains, and some sacred trees and similar places).

• Traditional African people respect such places. Hence in some traditional African groups, no bird, animal, or human being may be killed if it or s/he is hiding in such places. This helps to preserve the sanctity of the environment, as opposed to reckless destruction through the influence of science and technology.

• African art and symbols according to Mbiti (1975), Mburu (2003) deeply express African religious ideas. Commenting in this regard, Luguira (1990: 228) has observed that:
God has so wonderfully created the human race and deigned to participate in it. No wonder then that African artists spontaneously picture Christ with African features.

Bishop Fulton Sheen’s laconic saying comes more and more close to reality: ‘God’s next tune will be played on the black keys.’

Such religious messages are found in ancient carvings on wood, stools, calabashes, stones, sticks, pots, handcrafts, domestic animals, and human bodies. Similarly, African religious ideas are also found expressed in the form of masks and carvings on wood (Onyeneke, 1987).

• Some of the religious symbols are equally represented by insects, birds, and animals (e.g., among the Maasai, the frog, is a prophet or harbinger of the rain; hence its presence is celebrated by people in times of drought), (Abbink, 1993). Certain symbolic trees, figures, shapes and colors of all kinds are believed by the people as abodes of spirits.

• Proverbs, riddles, prayers, and wise sayings are also carriers of the religion. This is a point that can be found reflected in Desmond Tutu’s book titled, An African Prayer Book (1995). The same is true of Alyward Shorter’s book, Prayer in the Religions Traditions of Africa, which makes a similar reference. Indeed, authorities like Achebe, (1958); Mbiti, (1969); Nwoye, (1988) and Mburu (2003) agree that African proverbs provide us with a rich source of African wisdom. And we now know that some of such proverbs are religious in the messages they espouse. In one ‘Africa Magic’ movie, for instance, there is a proverb which says: “Although all the fingers are not expected to look alike, they are expected to cooperate with one another.”

• Another source of the African Traditional Religion is personal names and places particularly those names depicting the notion of God’s omnipotence (Chukwuka, an Igbo personal name), and His being the creator of the world (Chukwuneke; another Igbo personal name). Others are Onyekachukwu, an Igbo name meaning who is greater than
God; *Chukwudi*, another Igbo name, attesting to the idea that God exists). This is a point which Anozie’s (1968) study has been able to amplify and substantiate.

- Myths and legends: some stories, myths, and legends act as reliable sites for discovering a lot about African religious beliefs, rituals, and practices and the origin of these religious beliefs (Quarcooopome, 1987).

We have gone into these details to show African Christian youth that Traditional Religion is not all about shrines or other external trappings of the religion, like priests dressed in unusual clothes, with their eyelids painted with white chalk, as often depicted in ‘Africa Magic’ movies of the Nollywood variety. African religion, rather, permeates the entire life and being of the people as has been previously attested to, by Mbiti (1969). In this way, the essential presence of the religion can be found embedded in various cultural artifacts, beliefs, names, practices, and customs of the people. Hence the African Indigenous Religion surrounds and embraces the everyday life and world of the people, even among a good majority of the Christian members of various African communities.

**What the youth should know**

Having said all this, we are now in a position to respond to the question of what African Christian youth should know regarding the two religions of their inheritance. In response to this question the first point to make is that Christianity is not a foreign religion in the African soil. All Africans are rightful heirs to its heritage. This means that its presence is not made irrelevant by the strengths and values of African Traditional Religion highlighted in this article. Rather part of the central message of this article is that Christianity, judged from the values it shares with African Traditional Religion, is a universal religion which enriches as well as purifies some of the negative aspects of African Traditional Religion. It is the same point that *Gaudium et Spes, n. 58* was making when it points out that:

> The Good News of Christ continually renews the life and culture of fallen man; it combats and removes the error and evil, which flows from the ever present attraction of sin. It never ceases to purify and elevate the morality of people. It takes the spiritual qualities
and endowments of every age and nation, and with supernatural riches, it causes them to blossom, as it were, from within; it fortifies, completes and restores them in Christ.

This means that the two religions must complement one another in the African context. Thus as Arinze and Fitzgerald (1990:48) in their Pastoral Attention to African Traditional Religion insist: “it is important to preserve the unity of the Catholic faith throughout the whole world, although the manner of expressing the faith can differ, according to peoples and culture.”

The second point to make in the response to this question is that African Traditional Religion, when properly studied and understood can be seen to be far from a primitive religion. Many of the human and moral values embodied in its ethical norms and practices are similar to those emphasized by Christianity, as Arinze and Fitzgerald (1990: 48) again underscored:

The better African Traditional Religion is understood by the heralds of the gospel, the more suitable will be the presentation of Christianity to Africans. By the study of African Traditional Religion, the underlying felt-needs of Africans will be identified, so that it will become clear how Christianity can meet such needs. In this way, the Church will be more and more at home in Africa; and Africans will be more and more at home in the Church.

The third point to offer is that one cannot be a true practicing African Christian, without first of all being a true African person, who respects the positive human values propagated in African traditional religious heritage. Such examples include respect for the sacredness of human life, the spirit of ‘ubuntu’, regard for marriage and family life, procreation and care of children, respect for age and seniority, and hard-work as a means of achieving a livelihood.

Fourth, young Christians in Africa are children of double socialization, or heirs of two traditions and religious heritages; that is, African and Christian. African Traditional Religion is the religious and cultural context from which most Christians in Africa come, and in which
many of them still live to a great extent. This is a crucial point to note because according to Magesa (1990:115):

Christianity is neither a culture nor a monolithic institution; but it is, rather, a personal message, which encounters persons, not superficially but concretely in life situations. Thus it must strive to reach people as they are, that is, in their cultural setting and, as it were, let Christ and his spirit seize, capture and possess them. The task of the Church ‘as the salt of the earth’ is to let Christ, the word of God, assimilate a given people, as if by osmosis: by diffusing his spirit into them and transforming their thoughts, mentality and sensibility— their culture in its totality.

The lives of Christian youth in Africa will be much more enriched if these youths are able, without bias, to draw strength from the diversity of worldviews and resources embedding the two traditions and religions of their inheritance. Therefore, the main task of the Church for young African Christians will be to manifest Christ to the youth and let them “…encounter him, dialogue with him, opt for him and form a community with him in their midst and establish a true a koinonia. Thus, they will feel at home in their options” (Magesa, 1990: 115).

Fifth, the inculturation or indigenization of Christianity in African culture would mean no opposition between Christian values and the good values of the African person, such as those highlighted earlier in this presentation. It is only in that way that the African youth can be truly and fully an African and a Christian at the same time, not either/or (Nzomiwu, 1989; Kalu, 2003).

Finally, the presence of African religious rituals and practices in ‘Africa Magic’ movies should not deter the youth from watching these movies in search of positive principles and wisdom by which to live. It is argued that if they are properly educated and enlightened by their pastors and teachers they will be able to watch these movies and still be able to opt for Christ, led as it were, by a mature and discerning spirit.

**What African youth should do**
Based on the above understandings we should now consider the question of what should African youth do?

First, African Christian youth should learn to be critical consumers of messages conveyed in ‘Africa Magic’ movies, separating the negative from the useful lessons articulated in them. In this way, they should avoid being naive to the real effects of the magical practices often orchestrated in such movies.

Second, modern African Christian youth should see the tendency to resort to magical practices or the use of violence in getting through life (as noted among some of the characters in those movies), as grossly misguided and something to be avoided and not emulated. Additionally, modern African youth should learn how to pray using the resources they have in the Bible, and draw strength from the sacraments, which are an aspect of their Christian religious heritage, to sustain their hope and fortitude in times of need. For example, (the Psalms in the Bible which is the official prayer of the Church), which they have inherited as African Christians, is there for them to use in times of stress. In line with this perspective, the present author has always encouraged the youth with a song, given below, which emphasizes the importance of prayer in every aspect of people’s lives. The song goes as follows:

“Prayer is the key, Prayer is the key, Prayer is the master key,
Jesus started with prayer and He ended with prayer,
Prayer is the master key, Alleluia….”

A third idea is that African Christian youth should aim to try their talents at producing alternative movies that draw from the positive aspects of the two religious traditions that they are heir to, which challenge the virtue of resorting to use of magical and occult practices in coming to terms with the dilemmas of living in the contemporary African world. In this regard, they should not allow themselves to be influenced by the belief that they are too young to try their hands in authoring these movies. At 19, Ben Okri (1980) of Nigeria wrote his first novel, Flowers and Shadows, while in the university, and Ngugi wa Thion’o
(1964) of Kenya wrote his first novel, *Weep Not Child*, as an undergraduate at the University of Makerere, in Uganda. They should explore their creativity in producing informative movies that emerge not as a reaction to ‘Africa Magic’ movies, but the type essentially oriented to extol the advantages that accrue in going by the positive values embedded in both African Traditional Religion and Christianity. They should show respect to African human values which are equally emphasized in Christian ethics and morality: e.g. respect for the sanctity of human life, and the spirit of mutuality or the capacity to live for others emphasized in the *ubuntu* philosophy of life. This is in line with Paul’s teaching in his Letter to the Romans, Chapter 14:17, that “…the life and death of each of us has its influence on others….”

Finally, African Christian youth should learn to engage in useful living, grounded in patience and hard-work, as the only option for achieving a good name in life and the support of God’s blessings.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, let me reiterate the major argument of the present paper: the strengths and resources of African Traditional Religion are still attractive to most African Christians. The continued presence of its various trappings in ‘Africa Magic’ movies is a practical testimony to this conclusion. To make the young African Christians both truly Africans and truly Christians, Christian evangelists and theologians in Africa must recognize the fact that African Traditional Religion is more than magic or witchcraft. For, behind any such external trappings of its practices are important human values that constitute the essential ideals of the religion, which it shares with Christian teachings and into which most African children are socialized.

Recognizing this subtle consciousness of the African Traditional Religion is crucial in getting the African Christian youth ready for achieving the open-mindedness necessary for promoting a respectful dialogue between their Christian membership and their African religious heritage. In this regard, it is the joy of the present writer to note in Monsignor
Chidi D. Isizoh’s address to the participants in the 2008 Youth Conference in Uganda, that the Church is willing and happy to look into and work with, “what is true, good and beautiful” in our African Traditional Religious heritage as we continue in the process of inter-religious dialogue. Monsignor Isizoh’s observation is in line with a similar view credited to Arinze and Fitzgerald (1990: 48) who emphasized, over a decade ago, that “the Church respects the religions and cultures of various peoples, and wishes in her contact with those peoples, to preserve all that is true and good in their religion and culture.” What is argued in this paper is that it is in line with this positive spirit of believing in the complementary nature of the two religious traditions in Africa, namely, Christianity and African Traditional Religion, that our growth, fulfillment, and happiness as young African Christians, would seem to be positioned.

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Gaudium et Spes No. 58.


